

A Time of Reckoning

David Secrist, PhD

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A Time of Reckoning



Fall is upon us and soon the majority of cow/calf producers in Utah will have all the cows back home. Now it's time to reconcile the past year and put the finishing touches on next year's plan. Many meaningful production metrics will be gathered over the next month or so. How many calves will you wean and what will they weigh? What was your deathloss over the summer? Finally, you will determine how many of your cows are pregnant.

Preg-checking time can be a little unnerving as you hear "bred" or "open" called out. Hopefully, the pen holding the opens is pretty small and not very crowded! We all know that reproduction is the key to success on the ranch and by fall, there is nothing you can do but sit back and wait for your report card. Your pregnancy rate also has a huge impact on the financial prospects for next year.

There is a lot that goes in to having a smile on your face when preg-checking is done in the fall. It really starts just as soon as the calves come off the cow when you evaluate her body condition to understand your starting point. We won't dig into that too deeply in this article but, the "big-picture" question that every cattleman should answer is..."Do my cows and management plan best fit my environment?"

Over the last several decades, the cattle industry has been telling ranchers to improve the growth characteristics and carcass quality of the cattle they produce. While these characteristics are important to improve the efficiency of production and quality of the beef we produce, they may not be at the top of the list for cow/calf producer's profitability. Getting a cow bred early in the breeding

season and weaning a healthy calf tops my list. That is closely followed by the cost of getting those two things done on a consistent basis.

Bulls that will produce heavily muscled feedlot steers with an 1,000 lb. carcass grading prime after 200 days in the feedlot are not likely to give you a cow that fits your low-rainfall environment. A 1,200 lb. cow will eat over 9% more forage than a 1,100 cow. University of Nebraska research data suggests that the 1,100 lb. cow will wean a calf at 42% of her body weight. The 1,200 lb. cow will wean 40% of her body weight. Doing the math, the smaller cow will net a 7.2% higher return to the ranch than the larger cow. Simply put, you can run more cows with the same forage base with a smaller cow.

Your cows must breed within 85 days after calving to maintain a 12 month calving interval. A reasonable rule of thumb is that your calves are gaining 1.8 lbs. per day of age. In other words, for every day your cows are not bred past 85 days post-calving, her calf will be 1.8 lbs. lighter. In today's market that is costing the ranch \$4.50 per cow per day.

I realize that I opened a can of worms with this topic and a deeper dive is definitely in order. However, I challenge each of you to think about why you do what you do. What are the drivers in your genetic selection? How big should your cows be to optimize your resources? Are you monitoring cow body condition to give your cows the best chance to breed early and what is it costing you to do it? And finally, why do you calve when you do?

Answering these questions is at the center of successful ranching. Digging into these details will make for some pretty interesting discussions in the future!

Contact

David Secrist, PhD
David.secris@usu.edu